RELATIONAL ENGAGEMENTS OF THE INDIGENOUS AMERICAS

ALTERITY, ONTOLOGY, AND SHIFTING PARADIGMS

EDITED BY MELISSA R. BALTUS AND SARAH E. BAIRES

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ARCHAEOLOGY • ANTHROPOLOGY

"In this volume, Melissa R. Baltus and Sarah E. Baires have brought together a group of scholars whose works reflects the state of the art in theoretical debates around relational ontologies. This is a rapidly growing and multidisciplinary literature, but what marks this volume as so distinctive is the degree to which all the contributors have thoughtfully engaged with the recent critiques of how indigeneity has been presented in relational theory. The result is a timely and sophisticated collection of chapters that offers a significant step forward in our conceptualization of Indigenous pasts. Researchers and students working in this area who have not yet read this book will quickly find themselves out of date."

—**Darryl Wilkinson**, University of Cambridge

"Melissa R. Baltus and Sarah E. Baires have assembled a set of papers that engage with the relational turn in contemporary archaeology by forefronting the reciprocal relationships between persons and non-persons and things in pre-Columbian North America. This volume challenges scholars to shift their focus beyond human-centered explanatory models and to incorporate the agency and ontologies of animals, objects, minerals, and other non-human social beings. The result is an invitation to understand past worlds in terms of a dense web of active engagements which push disciplinary conventions and the creation of knowledge about the North American past into new and exciting areas."

—**Jennifer Birch**, University of Georgia

In *Relational Engagements of the Indigenous Americas*, Melissa R. Baltus and Sarah E. Baires critically examine the current understanding of relationality in the Americas, covering a diverse range of topics from Indigenous cosmologies to the life-world of the Inuit dog. The contributors to this diverse edited collection interrogate and discuss the multiple natures of relational ontologies, touching on the ever-changing, fluid, and varied ways in which people, both alive and dead, relate and related to their surrounding world. While the case studies presented in this edited collection all stem from the New World, the Indigenous histories and archaeological interpretations vary widely and the boundaries of relational theory are pushed to challenge current preconceptions of earlier ways of life in the Indigenous Americas.

Contributors

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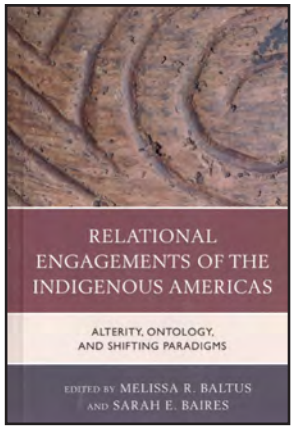

Relational Engagements of the Indigenous Americas: Alterity, Ontology, and Shifting Paradigms

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Reviewed by Zackary I. Gilmore, Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida.

One of the most influential theoretical developments in archaeology over the past decade has been the so-called "ontological turn." *Relational Engagements of the Indigenous Americas* adds to an ever-growing body of literature associated with this movement in arguing that archaeologists must acknowledge multiple ways of conceptualizing and "being" in the world if they hope to understand the lived realities of past indigenous peoples. Through the lens of six case studies from across North America, this volume effectively—and oftentimes eloquently—explores themes popular within ontology-focused archaeology, including animistic belief systems, relational personhood, the limits of human exceptionalism, and the social efficacy of nonhuman agents.

Two aspects set this book apart from its predecessors. First is the willingness of multiple authors to directly confront criticisms that have been leveled at the archaeology of alternate ontologies. As discussed by Sarah Baires in the Introduction, some have accused the architects of the ontological turn of perpetuating colonialism by co-opting indigenous concepts and perspectives and attributing them to Western scholars. Others contend that archaeologists are largely incapable of grasping the reality of alternative worlds and that a reliance on ethnographic analogy too often leads to ahistorical and overgeneralized accounts of indigenous ontologies. These potential pitfalls are repeatedly acknowledged and, for the most part, skillfully avoided by the volume's contributors. And second, a wide variety of archaeological methods are demonstrated for investigating past ontologies in diverse contexts (with and without direct ethnographic analogues), providing a valuable suite of potential strategies for others interested in pursuing ontological research.

In the first two chapters, Erica Hill and Peter Whitridge respectively employ distinct strategies in examining the social entanglements of humans and animals in the Arctic. Hill emphasizes that archaeologists must go beyond simply finding relational societies in the past and instead work to identify specific modes and consequences of relationality in particular contexts. Accordingly, she draws on the field of animal geography to explore various "meeting points" (p. 6) between animals and humans along the Arctic coast of Alaska. Isolating three specific spatial principles—proximity, liminality, and hybridity—Hill effectively demonstrates the value of her approach in illuminating distinct types of human-animal interactions across different spatiotemporal contexts and scales of analysis.

In a truly innovative study, Whitridge veers radically away from typical anthropocentric approaches in examining the experiences of dogs, as "fundamental co-inhabitants of the precontact Inuit lifeworld" (p. 23). Methodologically, he focuses on constructing and

comparing the "osteobiographies" of dogs across divergent contexts, thus providing a valuable window into the mutually constitutive relationship between dogs and humans in pre-Inuit and Inuit settings. In foregrounding the experiences and social bonds of dogs rather than the humans with which they interact, Whitridge's chapter comes as close as any to successfully transcending Western ontological categories.

Chapters 3, 4, and 6 each concentrate on pre-Columbian societies of the Eastern Woodlands of North America. In their chapter, Matthew Colvin and Victor Thompson direct attention toward a series of remarkable assemblages of wooden zoomorphic artifacts from southern Florida. Based primarily on temporally distant ethnographic accounts, their primary conclusions are: 1) that these carved figurines provide evidence of an animistic belief system in South Florida dating back to at least the Woodland Period, and 2) that the carvings functioned to help preserve and transmit traditional ecological knowledge related to southern Florida's aquatic environments. Although likely correct on both counts, the authors seem to lack the necessary contextual detail to move beyond these basic observations to the precise ontological principles at play and how they varied across through time and space. Further, much of the chapter's emphasis on managing natural resources and encoding ecological knowledge strikes me as decidedly non-relational in comparison to the integrated "lifeworlds" envisioned throughout the rest of the volume.

Melissa Baltus's chapter focuses on nonhuman actors (primarily pottery vessels) as "agents of change" (p. 63) in the evolution of the Mississippian Cahokia polity in the American Midwest. Drawing on extensive research conducted over recent decades, Baltus is able to trace the shifting role of specific pottery types (e.g., Ramey Incised jars) and special deposits in forging relations among far-flung communities and integrating them within the Mississippian world. She incorporates clay composition, temper choices, vessel form, depositional contexts, and other data in arguing that pottery alterations are not merely reflective of regional political change but instead constitute a critical driver of that change. This chapter benefits from an impressive level of empirical heft and deftly illustrates how relational ontologies can help archeologists better understand the past as lived, albeit only in cases where data and interpretations are subject to the deep contextualization required to come to meaningful conclusions.

In Chapter 6, Christopher Carr and colleagues suggest that to understand indigenous people on their own terms, it is necessary to take into account their understandings of souls, or rather "soul-like essences." With this in mind, the authors provide an extensive survey of historic sources documenting wide-ranging soul concepts among historic Woodland and Plains Indians. This information is then combined with archaeological evidence of diverse soul conceptions (in the form of data related to the placement of artifacts in the graves across Ohio Hopewell communities) to discredit the idea of Hopewell as a unified, panregional religion. While this point is well made, it is unfortunate that the authors stop short of proffering an alternative explanation for the so-called Hopewell phenomenon.

And finally, in Chapter 5, Christina Halperin employs two distinct methods to illustrate the fluid and contingent nature of ontological principles among lowland Maya

communities. First, she utilizes a biographical approach to understand how a sacred mountain at the Guatemalan site of Tayasal helped to "make history" in diverse ways through its active participation in the lives and memories of those who lived around it. She then compares representations of Maya "spiritual co-essences" from various written sources to analyze distinct power dynamics related to class and gender that existed during different historical periods. Beyond the substantive impact of this particular case, I find Halperin's larger contribution to be the model she provides for avoiding the kind of static and ahistorical account for which ontological theorists have so often been criticized.

Overall, *Relational Engagements of the Indigenous Americas* constitutes a worthwhile addition to rapidly expanding ontological studies in archaeology. Editors Baires and Baltus do an admirable job assembling and contextualizing a diverse set of papers that, together, effectively demonstrate both the significant potential and considerable (ethical and methodological) challenges associated with investigating alternative realities as lived. While some may question whether this should be archaeology's principal aim, as this volume attests, there should be little debate surrounding the quality of insights such an approach provides.